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ABSTRACT

Home study is practiced by most managers, who read or write reports, reflect on work projects and problems, and catch up on professional journals at home. A goal of home study advocates is to make such home study as useful as possible. A management development process known in England as action learning requires that 60 percent of study be done at home, 20 percent in groups at work, and 20 percent in tutor-led sessions away from work. It achieves completion rates of more than 75 percent (unheard of in most home-study-only programs) and is frequently very effective. By positioning the action learning combination study program in the workplace and requiring the wholehearted support of employers and colleagues, the motivation and commitment of those involved is transformed. Action learning works so well because: (1) the workplace offers an excellent laboratory to explore ideas; (2) many workplace colleagues can act as unofficial tutors and mentors; (3) the workplace offers opportunities to take action and thereby reinforce earning; and (4) the at-work context of learning demands wisdom in the use of knowledge--normally a missing ingredient in educational performance. Action learning can produce more effective managers and can be more powerful than stand-alone home study. This report describes briefly seven action learning projects and lists eight ways action learning programs use home study. (KC)

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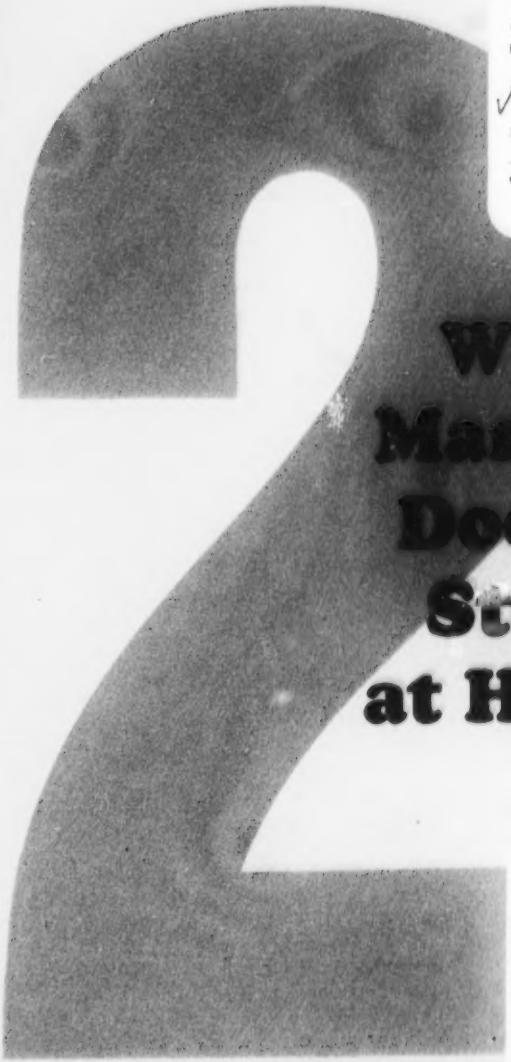

What Manager Doesn't Study at Home?

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NHSC OCCASIONAL PAPER NUMBER 2

by
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NHSC OCCASIONAL PAPERS are essays intended to stimulate and encourage candid exchanges of ideas between home study professionals.

Introduction

Home study began for most of us at school, when our teachers sent us out of class with "homework" to do. We received little or no guidance on how to do it and, all too often, our parents' contribution was either to ask if we had done it or to forbid social activities until we had. Doing it was normally enough for most parents -- they seldom knew how to help and were virtually never asked to be involved by the teachers.

And so it was when we went to college. Perhaps we received 10 or 20 hours of lectures per week and maybe 10 hours practical in scientific areas. For the rest, study was at home or at least on our own. We might have been instructed on how to use a library or handed a suggested reading list, but we were given little or no guidance on how to study at home or alone most effectively.

And so it is when we go to work. Almost every night and most weekends, our briefcases carry home reports to prepare or digest, and magazines to read covering the area of our professional expertise. But once again, what guidance, if any, do we receive on how to optimize the learning process?

Where are the Apostles of Home Study?

Home study has taken upon itself a precious, almost purist definition. The traditionalists among us typically exclude self-declared combination home study/resident studies, let alone studies that fail to recognize a home study component there at all, even if it amounts to well over half of every educational program offered by most campus-based institutions.

So far as I am concerned, home study is study at home, either in whole or in part. Alliance with other learning methods, environments or institutions should be welcomed. *An optimal learning system should be our goal.*

The home study movement has a vast educational audience waiting to be helped. The only thing needed to make it happen is our own creative imagination.

One of the best examples of accidental creativity has been the Open University in Great Britain. It has invested millions of dollars over the past 20 years in creating home study resource materials across a wide range of undergraduate programs for the arts and sciences. In joint ventures with academic publishers such as Penguin and also with the BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation), high quality materials have become available for those who organize programs in traditional campus-based institutions, as well as for the "TV eavesdropping market" in their armchairs at home.

It is not surprising how well the Open University resource materials compare with traditional institutions. The latter have little or no budget allocations and few educators present to create and develop well-designed programs of learning. Yet there are major funds available for development on the scale of the Open University other than from the government. The greatest users of good education in society are workplace employers, and the evidence is increasingly present that they are prepared to invest again in a wide-range of programs of development on a scale not seen since the 19th century.

Action Learning

For the balance of this occasional paper, I will describe a management development process known in Britain as ACTION LEARNING. It requires that 60% of study be done at home, 20% in groups at work, and 20% in tutor-led sessions away from work. It achieves completion rates of over 75% (unheard of in most home study-only programs) and it frequently makes silk purses out of sows' ears.

It cannot be claimed that excellent home study resources are the sole reasons for its success. It cannot be said that tutors are always above average. It cannot be said that the managers participating in the programs are extraordinarily well-qualified for the task.

What has to be said is that by positioning the Action Learning combination study program in the workplace, and requiring the wholehearted support of employers and colleagues, the motivation and commitment of those involved is transformed.

So why does Action Learning work so well?

- the workplace offers an excellent laboratory to explore ideas;
- many workplace colleagues can act as unofficial tutors and mentors;
- the workplace offers opportunities to take action and thereby reinforce learning;
- the at-work context of learning demands wisdom in the use of knowledge -- normally a missing ingredient in educational performances based on the "classroom of one" philosophy.

Why should employers invest in continuing educational studies for their managers in this way? Surely the managers will leave as soon as their programs are completed. With their certificate in hand, they will want promotions and salary increases.

Alas, all too often, that is exactly how managers behave. To unlock the investment resources needed, however, the Action Learning approach has to motivate managers to want to stay with their employers -- not for reasons of gratitude or bonding but because the Action Learning process has opened up opportunities for individual growth and development within the workplace which has made the investment. It is a sharing of the intellectual equity in the future of the business.

Action Learning is not education for its own sake. It is education for capability in the context of management education. Action Learning must produce more effective, not simply better qualified, managers. This goal is achieved for the employer/investor by requiring that assignments submitted for assessment are actionable within the workplace and when acted upon, return considerably more than the program cost. Management Action Learning readily yields returns on the investment of over 100% in three years, even if the manager concerned leaves during that period.

Learning to Compete with the Japanese

Du Pont Photosystems in Great Britain in the mid-1980's wanted to improve its competitive performance against increasing inroads made by the Japanese and other manufacturers of photosystems from the United States. The concern was most specific in health care and printing applications of photosystems. Electronic alternatives were also a threat. The Sales Director resolved to invite 27 of his managers to study marketing and to identify how it could be deployed to achieve the corporate purpose.

Home study was undertaken initially on logistics systems, customer account profitability analyses and customer service organizational structures. In each area, knowledge was formally tested in application and use. Despite good results, many felt more knowledge was needed to move the business and their careers forward. Of the 27 managers initially involved, 18 continued their studies all the way to the Master of Business Administration (MBA) level, including the Sales Director, over a period of three years. That full program involved the 18 managers in some 1000 hours each of home study, using customized resources. Every MBA final thesis included a thorough literature review that was focused on a field of corporate improvement that could be, and in almost all instances was, acted upon for the benefit of Du Pont Photosystems.

Home study alone could never have catered to the individual work styles of the managers involved. Sales executives are not overly given to reflection or theorizing. They are pragmatic and active, and they learn best that way. Yet the Action Learning process, with home study incorporated effectively as its major element, motivated and educated a crucially important team of managers.

Allied Irish Banks in Britain

Allied Irish Banks in Britain is quite a different enterprise than its operations in Ireland. It has a modest share of Britain's total financial services market, compared with 50% in Ireland. But between 1984 and 1989, it involved more than 70% of its 1300 employees in Action Learning programs built on home study course materials.

The programs have all been customized and range from customer service and marketing planning with guided home reading for senior executives. Eighteen managers have completed an MBA in Financial Services Management within the same framework of home study used by Du Pont, and 12 have obtained a one-year, 1300 hours Executive Diploma in Bank Marketing.

Helping Directors Direct

Research studies completed in Britain in the mid-1980's by Alan Mumford (a colleague at the International Management Centres and its Senior Professor of Management Development) showed that most company directors are not trained or developed for their jobs as directors. Most of what they know has been learned from a good boss, or accidentally along the way.

A predominantly home study based program of reading was developed and customized first for Pilkington Glass, then for Citimax and Swan Hunter Shipyards, that focused on strategic management and team leadership. The Action Learning component, using the directors' own workplace challenges as their focus, made it wholly acceptable that long hours of home study should be undertaken by individuals with more than enough reading to do at home already.

Field and Project Homesteads

Some of the more challenging applications of Action Learning are industry combination studies that have emerged with auditors, air crew, management consultants and project managers on oil rigs and construction sites. All too frequently, these employees are neither at work nor at their own homes, but in temporary lodgings, e.g., hotels, motels, or clients' housing. This market may provide the most powerful opportunities for home study -- a point seldom lost on the military in peace time in overseas assignments. What better opportunity to study international business than in an overseas context? What better opportunity for learning than for a consultant or auditor to reflect on what can be learned from the clients for whom they work? What better opportunity to tap the wellspring of learning, not just a series of anecdotes?

Home study resource materials are, however, indispensable for a viable learning process to occur. Access to professional tutors and library facilities will be sparse. Nonetheless, time is available and other like-minded colleagues can normally be relied upon to join in a debate or offer advice when called upon.

Secretarial Breakout into Management

Most recently, Action Learning has turned its attention to the managerial ladder for the executive secretary and personal assistant. The senior secretary in a workplace is already a key element in the managerial process, linking, communicating, managing time and priorities.

Through a program of 600 hours of home study over 18 months, linked to workplace applications in the areas of information technology and the professional expertise of other departments, International Management Centres, Buckingham, Great Britain, has created a qualification for Advanced Diploma in Administration and a Bachelor of Administration.

In Britain alone, there are over a quarter of a million secretaries and personal assistants who are potential candidates for such studies, each holding jobs that are not readily open to sustained off-the-job study programs.

First Aid and St. John

One of the most extraordinary educational markets to emerge worldwide in the past 20 years has been the requirement under industrial safety laws that employers must train their staff to be able to give first aid. In Britain, the market for such training is evenly shared between St. John Ambulance and the Red Cross who, of course, offer their own certificates of proficiency and produce their own first aid training resources.

But, managerially, St. John was operating in an old fashioned way. Its County structure was predominantly led by volunteers and, as

such, the coordination of administration and marketing had much room for improvement. Action Learning home study programs on marketing and selling first aid to industry were developed on a customized basis for County Directors to use with their volunteer staff. The results have been outstanding and more than covered the investment St. John made for their creation.

Building Ships for the Royal Navy

One of Britain's many industries that have been privatized during the Thatcher years has been shipbuilding. A particular yard, Swan Hunter on Tyneside, resolved to use the Action Learning home study approach to evolve its entrepreneurial strategy for the 1990's.

This was a nine month program for thirty senior managers and engineers which focused on total quality management of the shipyard. It was extremely vital for the shipyard to accomplish two things to win future contracts for Royal Navy ships after they had launched HMS Ark Royal and Falklands' War replacement vessels. It had to demonstrate its managerial skills and competencies to the Admiralty when their management auditors visited. Also, it had to put in a competitive bid at a price that would win major frigate orders at a worthwhile profit margin.

In November 1989, the Swan Hunter shipyard soared over the managerial audit hurdle and in December it won a competitive bid to build three new frigates -- a five year order.

The Swan Hunter shipyard has now moved on to develop marketing competencies throughout the organization and a cadre of key managers are proceeding to a full Master of Business Administration (MBA) by Action Learning studies.

Conclusion

Home study alone for most managers is probably perceived as an inconvenient and inappropriate way to learn. Yet, paradoxically, most managers do a very great deal of it. Most of any manager's truly

reflective work is accomplished away from the workplace. The challenge for the management development practitioner, therefore, is to improve the productivity of that home study. There are two obvious ways to do it: (1) by being professional in the way everything is studied at home; and (2) by accepting that workplace combination. Action Learning studies can frequently be even more powerful than "stand alone" home study.

How an Action Learning Program Uses Home Study

1. Identify the key area of competence to be improved.
2. Select managers who have the appropriate learning styles to be able to "action learn."
3. Identify what specific benefits improvement in competence can be achieved in discussion with the managers and employers.
4. Assemble tutorial inputs for home study that will be most helpful in achieving those benefits.
5. Recruit mentors at the place of work to supplement the formal tutorial relationship.
6. Create and develop team working among the individual managers taking the program.
7. Use team pressures to ensure home study is well done even to the point of work sharing.
8. Ensure that the study projects and assignments undertaken are actionable at work and also acted upon.

About the Author

Dr. Gordon Wills is Principal of the International Management Centres (IMC) based in Buckingham, England. IMC offers Action Learning studies in 18 countries, from Finland to New Zealand, including the United States. In June 1989, IMC became the first Britain-based institution to receive accreditation from the Accrediting Commission of the National Home Study Council.

Dr. Wills moved from industrial marketing research and advertising into the traditional university business school world in Britain in 1965. He was Foundation Professor of Marketing and Customer Policy at Bradford University and the Cranfield Institute in Britain. He was a visiting professor at the University of Alberta, Tulsa, Queensland and Western Australia, as well as the Helsinki School of Economics. Dr. Wills has written over 30 books and 200 hundred articles on topics ranging from fashion marketing and technological forecasting to marketing the countryside and banks.

Dr. Wills studied at home for his Master of Educational Administration degree with Britain's Open University and at night school and home for his graduate management diploma. His doctoral degree is in Marketing and Logistics.

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